

## Right to the city!

By Samstag / Nadia Prauhart + Tamara Schwarzmayr, Vienna

“Samstag” (Saturday), an initiative by Nadia Prauhart and Tamara Schwarzmayr, began to be active in public space in 1999. Inspired by the social function of South American street markets we started to question the function of public space in Vienna. What is possible in public space? Which social needs are reflected in the design and use of public space? And what do we learn about societies when looking at public space?

There are a lot of questions and many answers. We could start in the very beginning, asking for the definition of public space. Is it the space that belongs to everyone, no matter, who organizes and administrates the place? Is it, should it be accessible, for everyone, all the time? Who is responsible for public space - those, who administrate it, those, who use it, or both? And, until what degree does regulation of a place allow a still democratic use of it?

We started taking our right to the city in the late 1990ies, when we invited artists of various disciplines (literature, music, visual arts, theatre, design...) to perform together in public space. We made publicly visible, what normally remains indoors. Situated at the edge of Saturdays’ flea-market at Kettenbrückengasse, “Samstag” (Saturday), encountered several challenges: the wide range of possible audiences, the limited budget, the pros and cons of producing in public space, the place itself: the “black marketers” – part of the flea-market in the middle of a situation of selling, bargaining and, most of all, poverty. The best moments were, when interaction between those, who “normally” used the place and us, the “intruders”, started, even when the necessity of our activities was doubted. We interacted with the marketers, discussed with neighbours and public administrators. What is possible in public space? Nearly everything, as long as you accept the freedom and rights of others. The two summers we spent there made us get to know all possible situations public space provides. In wintertime we were invited to continue the Saturday-events in galleries and other arty places. It was warm and cosy and much easier to organize and produce, but there were no unexpected interventions, no drop-in audiences, less questioning; it was less the city itself, it was one of the many systems within.

At the end of 2001 we stopped our activities, mainly because we had encountered our personal limits. We always bore in mind, that they were to be continued, eventually with new means. Other experiences followed, like the participative and playful project “My perfect street”, which was realized in 2008 in Tokyo. After some weeks of urban research and taking pictures of various neighbourhoods in Tokyo, residents were invited to create their “perfect street” by the materials we provided: a fictive street, photos of situations, buildings, infrastructure and places to be added, a glue, a pen and a pair of scissors. Working in a completely unknown surrounding and culture brings along new questions. Can the function, the organization and the use of public space be compared here and there? Is it legitimate to apply the same methods or arguments? Taking a close look at the completely different situation of a mega-city like Tokyo we have to deny. The city as organism would not work if people did not care. Care more about how much space they use, where they stand, sit, eat, how they use public transport. In public space we follow unspoken and written rules, and using public space in Tokyo they make sense, we have to admit. And for sure, in smaller cities they make sense, too. The general rules and laws are useful for the functioning of society. Nevertheless, they set limits to our interaction with space and society. If it is not common to sit outside and talk to neighbours, people will not do so, although it does not harm anyone. As public space is in public hands, societies tend to execute stricter laws in order to prevent any possible discussion. This is wrong, since public space is public, and limitations might be good for some, but not for everyone. The agreement is to define certain places as playgrounds for playing, parks to be used for sitting, talking, walking, eating, benches for resting but not for sleeping, for example. In public space the individual may become invisible. The individual may turn into mass.

Many people do not care, some are happy, they do not have to care, some eventually do care. When in 2007 the European Capital of Culture Linz 2009 invited the residents to develop projects dealing with their own neighbourhood, the result proved that public space is a topic. During 2009 we realized - in cooperation with some hundreds of residents - eleven projects in nine different neighbourhoods. Most of them were in and about the shared environment called public space, claiming more open and undefined places where interaction is welcome. The initiatives ranged from temporary artistic interventions to a caravan as moving art gallery and simple meeting points, where people encountered for dinner, knitting-rounds and karaoke shows. There were a lot of hopes and expectations; an event as massive as a European Capital of Culture should be influent enough to convince politics and administration that the future design and use of public space in Linz could be

more creative. Those hopes remained unfulfilled; none of the residents' initiatives was continued after 2009, although the Linz09-team did not become tired of reminding the decision makers that the heterogeneity of a city defines its quality. Worse still, Linz has now installed a city-watch, which controls the public space of a lovely and wealthy baroque city with less than 200.000 inhabitants.

Back in Vienna in spring 2010 it happened that we got to know the Schwendermarkt, a neglected market place located in the 15<sup>th</sup> district, the district with the lowest income and the highest percentage of immigrant population in Vienna. The once big and important market place, today reduced to a minimum of size and appeal, is in a neighbourhood, where more than 160 languages are spoken, the shops change their stock during Ramadan and Saris are worn. This is where we started the project "Samstag in der Stadt" ("Saturday in Town"). From summer 2010 we were present, twice a week, working with our laptops on a table outside or in the former stock-place of the market. We got to know the children who are using the place to play and the elderly who walk their dogs. We got in contact with the few remaining marketers and learned about their problems. We visited initiatives and institutions in the neighbourhood, asking for cooperation. Every time we returned, there was some new acquaintance, more information and - most important - more confidence in our presence. We started planning events, which took place on the Saturdays in September 2010, involving children and elderly people, shop-owners and marketers, institutions and private persons, experts and artists.

"Samstag in der Stadt" provides a kind of social arena, a place for interaction and intervention, and helps to make the variety of the neighbours visible. Different social groups which co-exist in the neighbourhood – people of different ethnicities or cultures, classes and ages – start to pay attention to each other by meeting at the same place, or as actors or as visitors. They are visible and at the same time they observe and hopefully accept the perceived differences. By being involved in the design of the "Samstag in der Stadt" events, and therefore involved in what happens at the "Schwendermarkt", people might get a sense of ownership, of personal investment and of participation. The "Schwendermarkt" became more a more democratic place, so we hope.

Samstag's approach is severalfold: it reminds people of their right to the city and supports them to make use of this right in a low-threshold process. It uses public space to make the cultural variety visible as far as possible, it invites to communicate and to get curious about the other/s. "Samstag" also aims to support – by its intervention – the re-vitalization of "dead" places, especially of market areas. We will continue the events at the "Schwendermarkt" in 2011 and are meanwhile working on a network of people who are interested in discussing the future of this public space. The administration asked us for some advice, and we ask those, who live there by inviting them to join the Round Tables. Within the whole process of discussing the future of the place and the market itself, it is important to question what kind of unplanned activities and what non-commercial uses it provides.

Let us keep in mind Lefebvre's inviting formula: Everyone has a right to the city! This implies that we have a notion about the city as a whole. Moving in and around the same neighbourhoods turns any city into a village. The city is much bigger than we think. The possibilities are more. And our rights are too.

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Studies of Comparative Literature and Romanic Languages in Vienna and Lisbon, Brazil and Chile. Since the early 1990s working in arts and culture projects. 2007-2009 project developer and manager for Linz 2009, European Capital of Culture, in the fields of migration, community building and neighbourhood-culture (among others [www.kulturhauptstadtteil.at](http://www.kulturhauptstadtteil.at)). Other projects: "Samstag" (Vienna 1999-2001), "My perfect street" (Tokyo 2008) and "Samstag in der Stadt" (from 2010).

**[www.samstagerstadt.at](http://www.samstagerstadt.at)**